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REFUGEES AT BARD COLLEGE

OPEN HEARTS, OPEN MINDS

by James Rodewald '82

In March, an anonymous donation of \$1 million was given to the Program for International Education and Social Change (PIE-SC) to fund scholarships for refugee students from Syria. That generous gift will bring to 30 the number of PIE-SC scholars from Syria and other countries in crisis who are working toward their bachelor's degrees at Bard College Berlin. Such programs seem to become necessary with depressing regularity, and Bard College continues to demonstrate its commitment to freedom, inclusion, and openness by answering the call whenever its core values are threatened.

When Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini placed a \$1.5 million bounty on Salman Rushdie's head in 1989, the worldwide reaction was swift and dramatic, though by no means unanimously supportive of the writer. One response would have gone largely unnoticed had Rushdie not told the following story at the 1996 Bard College Commencement.

Within weeks of the threat made against me by the mullahs of Iran, I was approached by the president of Bard, through my literary agent, and asked if I would consider accepting a place on the faculty of this college. More than a place: I was assured that I could find, here in Annandale, among the Bard community, many friends, and a safe haven in which I could live and work. Alas, I was not able, in those difficult days, to take up this courageous offer, but I have never forgotten that, at a moment when red-alert signals were flashing all over the world and all sorts of people and institutions were running scared, Bard College did the opposite—that it moved towards me, in intellectual solidarity and human concern, and made not lofty speeches but a concrete offer of help. I hope you will all feel proud that Bard, quietly, without fanfares, made such a principled gesture at such a time.

That offer of asylum was in keeping with a long tradition at Bard, going back at least to the 1930s, of welcoming brilliant people into our community who were no longer welcome in theirs. People like Felix Hirsch, a well-known editor in Berlin, who was hired at Bard as a librarian in 1936 and also taught modern European history—a subject he knew all too well; Emil Hauser, a founding member of the Budapest String Quartet, who immigrated to Jerusalem in 1932, helped rescue many Jews from Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Germany, and came to Bard in 1940 to teach music; labor economist Adolf Sturmthal, who organized aid for German and Austrian socialist refugees in 1933 and '34, came to the United States in 1938, and also joined the Bard faculty

in 1940; Werner Wolff, a Berlin psychologist who left Germany to work in Spain when Hitler came to power, moved to the United States in 1939, began teaching at Bard in 1943, and went on to write books on subjects ranging from anthropology to graphology to child psychology; Justus Rosenberg, professor emeritus of languages and literature and visiting professor of literature, who was part of a group that helped 2,000 antifascist intellectuals and cultural figures leave Vichy France in 1940 and has been teaching at Bard since 1962; Adolfas Mekas, who as a teenager fled Lithuania in 1944 with his brother Jonas to avoid prosecution by the German military police, spent five years in displaced persons camps, was finally able to sail to New York City in 1949, and founded the Film Program at Bard, where he taught from 1971 until his retirement in 2004.

Not all refugees are forced to cross oceans, of course. In 1941, after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order authorizing the military to exclude "any or all persons" from "military areas," which he empowered the military itself to define. The armed forces proclaimed the entire West Coast such an area and began the process of moving 110,000 to 120,000 U.S. residents of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, into internment camps. Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the University of California, Irvine, School of Law, called this action "an instance where the government infringed on the most basic liberties of Japanese-Americans solely on the basis of race, without in any way making the nation safer." And he described the Supreme Court decision that declared the executive order constitutional as "one of the worst decisions in history." No less a figure than the 42nd president of the United States, George H. W. Bush, seems to have agreed. In 1991, in remarks commemorating the 50th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Bush said, "No nation can fully understand itself or find its place in the world if it does not look with clear eyes at all the glories and disgraces, too, of the past. We, in the United States, acknowledge such an injustice in our own history: the internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry was a great injustice, and it will never be repeated." At the time, such certainty sounded pretty safe. It doesn't seem quite as inevitable today.

Many of those internees had been attending college, and the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council was established to help minimize the disruption in their education. In the end, more than 4,000 students were able to enroll in colleges away from the West Coast. Three came to Bard (that may sound like a small number, but Bard's graduating classes of 1943 and '44 were no more than five

or six): Taro Kawa, Tom Hayashi, and Jin Kinoshita, a pioneer in cataract treatment who was twice nominated for the Nobel Prize.

Perhaps the College's most ambitious program to welcome displaced students was the Language and Orientation Course organized for Hungarians who fled after their attempted revolution against communist dictatorship was put down by the Soviet army. In December 1956, more than 300 Hungarians, from 15 to 35 years old, came to Bard for eight weeks to learn English and receive an introduction to life in America. The director of that program was William Frauenfelder, who emigrated from Switzerland after World War I. "I left discouragement and many fears behind me when I came to the United States," Frauenfelder told a Bard newspaper reporter in 1947. Such a background made him the perfect person to head up the very successful program. Among the young men and women who spent that winter at Bard and went on to study in American universities was László Z. Bitó '60, who earned his degree in biology at Bard, got his Ph.D. at Columbia, and later developed a groundbreaking treatment for glaucoma (see Fall 2016 *Bardian*). Bitó has moved back to his native Hungary and continues to be deeply engaged in social issues. Last October he attended a demonstration against the government of prime minister Victor Orban, which has led opposition to a European Union plan for member states to take in people fleeing conflict in Syria and elsewhere. Bitó wore a sign saying, "I was a refugee too."

Heinrich Bluecher left Germany in January 1934, after helping "assist the victims as much as I could," he wrote a decade later, "which was possible for me as a non-Jewish person." Bluecher made his way to Paris where, in 1936, he met Hannah Arendt. She had fled Germany after a short stay in a Gestapo prison for the alleged crime of "subversive research" in a library. They married in 1940 and moved to New York City a year later. A decade after that, Bard President James Case came up with the idea for a Common Course, which he saw as an examination of "a whole series of questions dealing with major issues in man's . . . political, economic, and social aims; . . . his artistic, intellectual, religious, and moral concerns." Case hired Bluecher to direct the program, and Bluecher spent the next several months meeting with students and faculty to further define the course's parameters and goals. "The common core course has as its task to establish human freedom from within in such a way that all the fields of human endeavor begin to form a living community and enter into creative mutual collaboration," Bluecher wrote in 1952. "Its ultimate purpose is . . . to help make the human mind . . . an open mind for an open human world . . . lest it fall into the trap of whichever tyrannical idea of totality."

Human decision-making is complicated, to say the least. People's lives can be ruined—and millions have been ended—by errors induced by biases in judgment. Whatever you think of this particular moment, it is unquestionably challenging for those who believe in equality, dignity, respect, freedom, and education. Our best hope continues to be education. We need people like Sana Mustafa '17, a Syrian

refugee who came to Bard in 2013 and is speaking around the world on the effects of war and detention, community advocacy, and humanitarian efforts. She also works with various organizations on engagement projects related to refugee concerns. People like Zelda Bas '16, a political studies major with a focus in global and international studies, who earned a grant from Bard's Center for Civic Engagement to enable her to volunteer in a refugee camp in Germany. There she worked with children, most from Syria, conducted interviews for her Senior Project on homelessness—both physical and spiritual—and took the photographs for "Syria Cry," her exhibition in the Charles P. Stevenson Jr. Library in February 2016. People like Raed Al-Abbasee '13, who was a student at Al Mustansiriya College of Medicine in Baghdad when escalating violence there and death threats against his family forced them to flee to Syria (see Spring 2013 *Bardian*). Al-Abbasee knew that in Syria he would be unable to complete his education. And then he heard about the Iraqi Student Project,



Jonas Mekas Overlooking Kassel/Mattenberg Displaced Persons Camp, 1948, Adolfas Mekas

which helps displaced Iraqi students study in the United States. With the support of members of the local community, several nonprofits, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, which helped relocate his family, Al-Abbasee was able to take advantage of Bard's prestigious Distinguished Scientist Scholarship. He is now working toward a Ph.D. at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

The Bard community does this well. Gyula Nyikos, the chief English instructor for the Hungarian refugee students, said of Bard's president at the time, "Jim Case didn't open the doors; he *flung* them open." The richness of humanity that, against so many odds, walks through those doors—in Annandale, around the country, and around the world—continues to inform and inspire. Actually, these aren't things Bard does. This is what Bard is.

For information on the Bard Sanctuary Fund, which supports refugee and undocumented students, visit cce.bard.edu/sanctuary